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ABSTRACT

The career development of gay men and lesbian women is complicated by both internal and external factors. Internally, they are at different stages of integrating and appreciating their gay and lesbian identities, and they will consequently make different decisions regarding their career choice and their level of outness in the work environment. Externally, the work environment itself plays a role in their level of outness too and in their appraisal of the safety of the particular work environment and of the occupation in general. Readers are encouraged to begin their own work in overcoming heterosexism and homonegativity, thereby helping to create greater inclusivity for gay and lesbian individuals while simultaneously honoring the Canadian ideal of respecting diversity. (Contains 25 references.) (Author)

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"The Corporate Closet: Career Challenges of Gay and Lesbian Individuals"

Kevin G. Alderson, Ph.D., C. Psych.
Assistant Professor
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

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We were talking about sexual minorities yesterday in class. I asked the class if they could have been born white heterosexual male, thereby belonging to the most privileged group in our society, would they have chosen that? Some students said they would, but one said she is very happy being a woman and just wished that she was living in a society that valued women as much as men. I also would love to see a day when we have eliminated a sense that anyone is worth morethan anyone else. I doubt if it will ever happen somehow. Pecking orders of power and voice seem endemic within virtually every society. Some people are, consequently, more privileged than others. A black student then shared his belief that gay men and lesbian women should not be different from other minority groups regarding their views of self. (Hereafter I will refer to *gay men and lesbian women* as *gay* for the sake of brevity. The reader should understand, however, that gay women generally prefer to maintain a distinct identity from gay men by referring to themselves as *lesbian* instead of as *gay*.) He doubted that Jews would prefer to be Gentiles or that women would prefer to be men. As a black man, he said he would not want to be white. Following this logic, he argued that gays ought to feel the same. But do they? If not, why not?

The outright prejudice and discrimination against gays has a long history (O'Donohue and Caselles 1993), and its influence today remains pervasive (Cochran 2001). Despite the Canadian ideal of respecting diversity, polls still indicate that many Canadians view gay individuals negatively (Bibby 1995, cited in Hyde, DeLamater, and Byers 2001). Twenty percent of gay men have been physically assaulted (Ratner 1993), and the vast majority have experienced verbal harassment (Mays and Cochran 2001).

The Canadian Counselling Association and the Canadian Psychological Association have charged their members with respecting diversity, including diversity based on sexual minorities (Canadian Psychological Association 2000; Sheppard, Schulz, and McMahon 1999). But we also know that most therapists continue to harbour either subtle or obvious forms of bias against gay individuals (Cochran 2001). Cochran provides some examples of subtle bias in counselling practice, such as therapists having trouble remembering client information, avoiding topics that the therapist finds disturbing, and either over-emphasizing or under-emphasizing the importance that sexual orientation has regarding the client's presenting problem.

At the beginning of my presentation at NATCON 2003, I asked the attendees to write down and submit to me how many years of full-time and part-time post-secondary education they had to date (credit courses), their highest credential earned, and how many hours of training they received in working with gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (GLB). Of approximately 40 attendees at my session, 36 provided the answers summarized below:

Post-Sec Credentials of Attendees	Mean Years of Post-Sec	Hours of GLB Training		
		Mode	Median	Mean
6 with certificates or diplomas	3.3	0	0.5	Not meaningful (300 hours reported by one)
14 with bachelor's degrees	5.6	0	13	Not meaningful (500 and 1000 hours reported by two)
15 with master's degrees	8.3	0	4	8.2
1 with doctorate degree	(Not reported here)			

Although these data are nonrepresentative, it is notable that the modal response of the amount of hours devoted to GLB training across educational levels is zero. The modal response from the majority of universities offering masters level training in counselling psychology in Canada is about three hours of training in GLB issues and counselling practice (see Alderson 2002a). Students in both counselling and clinical psychology report that they are unprepared to work with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients (Bahr, Brish, and Croteau 2000). Most mental-health professionals, including career counsellors, are inadequately prepared to work with gay and lesbian clients (Phillips 2000).

Now coming back to the black student's comments in class yesterday, there are some significant differences that gays and lesbians face compared to other minority groups. Gay people are part of an invisible minority group. You won't know that most gay people are gay unless they tell you, and because of the fear of prejudice, discrimination, and overt/covert forms of aggression, many will not. The justifiable fear that keeps them in the closet (i.e., remaining secretive about one's sexual identity as gay or lesbian) also creates a "Catch 22" paradox. The more

invisible the community, the less non-gay people come to know those who are gay. In turn, this allows stereotypes and myths about gays to flourish. I recommend in *Breaking Out* (Alderson 2002b) that gay individuals come out to others, unless the cost is too great. The more that people know us, the more the stereotypes and myths will lessen. Research also suggests that it is unhealthy for gay people, both physically (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, and Visscher 1996) and mentally (Frable, Wortman, and Joseph 1997) to live a closeted life.

Most people who belong to minority groups also have parents who share their minority group status. In a healthy family, they are taught to be proud of who they are as Jews, Blacks, or whatever. Most gay people, however, do not have parents who are gay, and the majority react with various degrees of disdain when they find out their son or daughter is gay (Savin-Williams and Dube 1998), in some case leading to outright violence against them (Beeler and DiProva 1999). I agree with my student that gays and lesbians ought to feel proud of who they are. However, the average age at which men and women first become aware of their homosexual feelings is 12 years and 13 years, respectively (Obear and Reynolds 1986, cited in Pope, Prince, and Mitchell 2000). But they don't develop positive gay identities until age 28 and 29, respectively (Obear and Reynolds). This means the acquisition of a positive gay identity takes, on average, about 15 years!

Cass (1979) recognized many years ago that gay men and lesbians are at various stages of development regarding their coming-out journeys and gay identity integration. Her model includes six stages: (1) Identity Confusion, in which gays are confused by their same-sex attractions, (2) Identity Comparison, in which gays begin learning about the gay world, (3) Identity Tolerance, in which increased contact with gay individuals occurs, (4) Identity Acceptance, in which increased comfort develops around the idea of being gay, (5) Identity Pride, in which gays possibly immerse with gay culture and feel anger toward heterosexuals, and (6) Identity Synthesis, in which gays accept both gay culture and the heterosexual community. Where gay individuals are at developmentally will significantly affect their career decision-making and how they manage their stigmatized identity. Gay individuals in one of the first three stages in Cass' model are still in conflict about their sexual identity, hoping that their homosexual inclinations are simply part of a "phase." We might predict that gay people who are conflicted about their identities will choose careers less reflective of their capabilities compared to those at higher levels of identity integration. Research, however, has not empirically tested this hypothesis to date.

What we do know is that their career development can be delayed, stalled, or misdirected due to the amount of energy it takes to integrate a positive gay or lesbian identity (Croteau, Anderson, Distefano, and Kampa-Kokesch 2000), and that making a career decision for gays can be particularly difficult (Chung and Harmon 1994). Discrimination against gays in work environments is pervasive (Croteau et al.) with figures between 25% and 66% noted in the literature (Croteau et al.). No wonder the vast majority do not disclose to their employers or work colleagues (Nauta, Saucier, and Woodard 2001). If gays decide to attend a post-secondary school, they will encounter significant amounts of homophobia there as well (Risdon, Cook, and Willmns 2000).

Where a person is at developmentally will also have bearing on whether they are honest with others at work about their sexual identity. Griffin (1992, cited in Croteau et al. 2000) proposed four categories of identity management strategies: passing, covering, implicitly out, and explicitly out. Those in Cass' stage three and some in stage four would likely use passing, which allows gay individuals to remain highly closeted. Those who pass deceive others into believing they are heterosexual. Closeted individuals live a lie at work. When asked how they spent their weekend, they are forced to omit any reference to their involvement with gay people and the gay community. When in a committed relationship, they are forced to lie about someone they have deep feelings for.

Some in Cass' stage four might use covering, which involves attempting to be seen as heterosexual, but not trying to fake heterosexuality. A few in stage four and most in stage five and six would likely be either implicitly out, which involves being honest about one's life, but not using the label of gay, lesbian, or bisexual, or explicitly out, which involves directly telling other people one's sexual identity.

Besides their developmental stage, another factor that will determine the extent to which gay people disclose their sexual identity at work is the perceived level of heterosexism[3] in their work environment (Chojnacki and Gelberg 1994). (Whereas homophobia refers to fear or varying degrees of dislike for gay individuals, *heterosexism* refers to an ideology that excludes reference to gay people, effectively making them invisible.) Chojnacki and Gelberg suggested four levels of work environment heterosexism: overt discrimination, covert discrimination, tolerance, and affirmation.

Work environments that overtly discriminate have both formal and informal policies against gay individuals. The Canadian military, for example, used to prevent openly gay individuals from enlisting, and if later discovered, would receive a discharge from continuing service. Environments that covertly discriminate are those in which there is no formal policy against hiring or firing gay individuals, but there remains informal discrimination at the work setting. An open gay person would not be hired or promoted by the employer or manager. The best current example here is the "don't tell" policy in the United States military. Work environments that tolerate gay employees have formal anti-discrimination policies protecting those with different sexual orientations. They do not provide any additional support for sexual minorities, such as insurance coverage for same-sex partners. Finally, an affirming work environment has formal anti-discrimination policy, and other forms of support for gay employees. Gay employees are valued for their diversity. Some examples include having same-sex partner benefits, offering a gay support group or club, and providing training for employees about sexual diversity.

If you provide career counselling to gay clients, you can help them assess potential work environments prior to entry. Croteau and Hedstrom (1993) suggest three practical methods: (1) seek out resources that identify gay affirmative work environments, (2) talk with other gay people about their experience with a specific employer, and (3) find out if the client wants to use the most direct method (i.e., asking the employer about support for open gay employees). Perhaps you already work with gay people, whether or not you know it. It is imperative that you challenge your own views about this population if you are going to effectively help them with their concerns. The next section looks at your development toward becoming a gay-affirmative individual.

On Becoming a Gay-Affirmative Person

The research is clear: most therapists harbour misunderstandings about gay and lesbian individuals at best and outright prejudice and/or heterosexist attitudes at worst. Where are you at currently in your understanding and acceptance of gay clients? The following questions will help you reflect on this:

1. How would you feel if your son or daughter announced that he or she was gay? Would it be better if he or she were heterosexual? Why or why not?

2. How would you feel about sharing a hotel room with a gay person of your gender?

3. Would you allow yourself to become close friends with someone who is gay?

4. Would you invite open gay individuals to your wedding, and encourage them to dance with their same-sex partners?

Here are two questions to help you assess your current work environment:

1. Do you have open gay employees at your work? How do others, especially the management, receive them?

2. At your employer's Christmas party, do gay individuals dance with their same-sex partners?

You also need to know that gay individuals have become especially attune to noticing subtle signs of homophobia, homonegativity[4], and heterosexism in their dealings with people. If they need help, they pay attention to whether they can be honest with you about their sexuality. (*Homonegativity* is a more specific and modern version of the term homophobia. It refers to having negative views toward gay individuals without implying that they are fearful of them.) A gay person often looks for signs of tolerance/acceptance when entering an office for the first time. For example, having a rainbow flag or an inverted pink triangle (both gay-affirmative symbols) visible is one of the easiest ways to indicate your openness to them. Another good approach is having books on your shelves about gays and lesbians, or posters on the walls from gay and lesbian organizations. When you begin talking, remember to use inclusive language. A good suggestion comes from Morrow (1997). She suggests asking yourself, "How would I talk about this differently if I knew this person were gay or lesbian?" When asking about relationships, for example, ask if he or she has a partner, not a boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse. By working on *your* inner feelings and attitudes toward gay people and by showing them signs that you do honestly accept them, you will be creating a safe

environment for them to explore their career challenges, their pain, and their love. I commend you for making the effort.

Summary and Conclusions

The career development of gay and lesbian individuals is compounded and complicated by two factors: one internal and the other external. Internally, gay people are at different stages of identifying, tolerating, understanding, accepting, and celebrating their same-sex feelings, attractions, and behaviours. Consequently, their identity development as a gay person interacts with the career choices they make. Externally, gay people will enter occupations and work environments with varying degrees of heterosexism and homonegativity. The environment can have a profound effect on a person's sense of belonging and safety, and can determine their potential for career success or failure.

We live in a society that idealizes respect for diversity, but analogous to Alvin Toffler's (1970) premise in *Future Shock*, which suggested that technology is advancing more quickly than people can emotionally and mentally adjust to the changes produced by it, research indicates that many people's attitudes are not synchronous with this Canadian ideal regarding gays and lesbians. Gay people have become more visible and gay rights are being granted to them faster than many non-gay people have had time to accept.

I look forward to the day when gay people can walk hand-in-hand anywhere in this great country without hearing "faggot" or "dyke" shouted at them from others as they share their mutual affection. The time for change is long overdue, and ultimately this change will first begin in the hearts and souls of people like you.

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Signature: K. Alderson	Printed Name/Position/Title: Dr Kevin Alderson Assistant Professor
Organization/Address: University of Calgary	Telephone: 403 220 6258 FAX: 403 282 9244
	E-Mail Address: alderson@ucalgary.ca Date: Nov. 13/03